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SUBJECT: UNHCR HAVANA HEAD OFFERS A LOOK AT THIRD COUNTRY REFUGEE
SITUATION IN CUBA

¶1. On 4 November, RefCoord called on Alberto Aragon Cao, head of the UNHCR office in Havana. Aragon, a Cuban national, has worked for UNHCR in Havana for 17 years and speaks English well. He previously worked in the Ministry of Education where he dealt frequently with UNHCR on cases of foreign students in Cuba claiming refugee status. He supervises one staff member and their offices are co-located with UNDP.

¶2. In recent years, UNHCR has referred approximately 2- 4 cases to USINT per year and approximately the same number to the Canadian Embassy. The number changes significantly from year to year, however. Records show that in 1994 and 1995 there were 41 and 23 referrals, respectively, followed by 6 years with no referrals. Although there are 14 other embassies with whom Aragon says he can work, if refugees do not have family elsewhere, he usually refers their cases to USINT or the Canadians. This is for two reasons: The European countries prefer to accept groups and most of the cases in Havana are individuals; and only USINT and the Canadian Embassy are set up to process refugees in Havana, the others do the processing in their capitals. In the past, Aragon has referred cases to the embassies of the UK, Finland, France and Brazil.

¶3. An Ethiopian refugee, who had studied engineering in Cuba on a scholarship and is now working, was referred by UNHCR to USINT and is scheduled to be resettled in Phoenix, AZ, in December. Aragon expects to refer a few cases to USINT before the end of the year, and about the same number to Canada. He currently has 12 refugees in country, including 2 from Eritrea he plans to refer to USINT. Many, but not all, refugees come to Cuba as students. Aragon said there is no particular source country for refugees in Cuba, saying they come from all over. For many, Cuba is simply the least expensive country to visit.

¶4. Aragon reports that Cuba is not a signatory to any international agreements regarding refugees and Cuban law does not require protection of refugees or provision of first asylum. But the GOC tolerates the presence of refugees awaiting resettlement because it respects the mandate of the UN, including protection of refugees. Aragon says, "They let us do our job." The GOC will not expel someone once UNHCR has declared them a refugee. Refugees are issued a document permitting them to stay, are required to check in with Cuban Immigration every two weeks but generally are not allowed to work. (The Ethiopian was working before he applied for UNHCR protection.)

¶5. Unlike other locations around the world, UNHCR cannot rely on NGOs or churches to help support refugees awaiting resettlement. By agreement with the GOC, NGOs have limited functions in Cuba which they do not want to exceed. For their part, churches lack the resources needed to provide support services. Therefore, UNHCR must cover living expenses for refugees. When medical services are necessary, Red Cross helps facilitate care at specific hospitals set up to handle foreigners. If there are dependent children who need to attend school, the GOC has allowed them to attend certain schools in Havana which are accustomed to accommodating foreign

students. Aragon noted that the law says all children have the right to education, not all Cuban children. Meeting medical and educational needs through informal or ad hoc arrangements is precarious and Aragon wishes it were otherwise. Nonetheless, he said, the job always gets done and the GOC has always delivered.

¶16. When asked if he had any questions about USINT's in-country refugee program, Aragon said he knows about it but does not need to know details. He is often asked about our program at public events, but demurs.

Farrar